

UK parents trying to protect children face fines, imprisonment and safeguarding referrals as school COVID cases soar

Margot Miller
21 October 2021

Parents shielding their children by keeping them away from unsafe schools are being threatened with fines, imprisonment or even the threat of having their children taken into the care of social services.

Schools reopening for the autumn term has fuelled a surge in cases, spreading into the community and leading to an increase in hospitalisations in children and older age groups.

On October 14, 209,000 children were absent from school for COVID related reasons, including 111,000 confirmed cases. That same day, 1.8 percent of teachers and school leaders and 1.6 percent of teaching assistants were absent due to COVID. On October 19, twitter group Long Covid Kids reported “25 kids hospitalised in the last 24 hours with preventable illness.”

This led to appeals by National Health Service leaders for the Johnson government to implement a Plan B—with the response back: “the government has no plans to bring in any contingency measures yet.”

Government mouthpiece Dr Camilla Kingdon, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH), recommended ending the twice weekly lateral flow testing in schools.

Earlier in the month, Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi announced the government’s maniacal mission to raise school attendance figures, during a life-threatening pandemic that necessitates school closures. New to the post, he instructed his department to do “a deep dive into what’s happening with absenteeism.” He aims to work with Ofsted (the school inspectorate) to raise attendance figures. “Some of it is Covid-related both in terms of a student may have Covid and is therefore self-isolating... what I would describe as Covid anxiety—whether it be parental anxiety, students’ anxiety.”

Those “anxious” parents are in fact legitimately appalled at the deaths of 96 UK children from COVID and the 11,000 children suffering Long COVID for over a year. But for trying to protect their children, they face the wrath of the

authorities.

Mother of three, Sharon, explained to the WSWs how she was forced to deregister her youngest daughter 14-year-old Kelsey from school.

“I never dreamt of taking her out of school,” she said. But “her school was one of 200 schools doing trials.”

In March 2021, the government launched a pilot scheme involving 200 schools and colleges, replacing daily lateral flow testing with the need for students in close contact with a positive case to self-isolate.

“We got minimal information,” continued Sharon. “School sent out a [permission] letter to parents. As soon as I read it, I was flabbergasted. The virus is airborne, [it would mean] taking it out to families, into the communities, it will spread. I said to the head teacher, ‘You’re giving me no choice. If my child is sitting next to a child who is positive, everyone is part of the trial.’ The head just said be part of the trial or leave. So, I took my daughter out. Schools are unsafe. But it’s gone way beyond that now, they’re not isolating any contact.”

On July 17, the government lifted all mandatory restrictions and social distancing. In schools, mask wearing and quarantining after close contact with a positive case was no longer advised. This applied to Clinically Vulnerable (CV) and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) staff and children. Self-isolation was only recommended after a positive PCR test.

As Kelsey was not provided with any alternative remote provision, Sharon “signed [her] on for online private school because she is doing GCSEs in two years, it’s costing us a fortune.”

“All children should be protected,” she continued, “Vulnerable or not. I cannot believe the corruption, it’s all about privatisation, money. My child is being protected, but it’s tragic, parents saying they could be fined [for not sending their children into school].

“At the very beginning of the pandemic, seeing people

dying gasping for air in Italy, I was screaming at the TV, because governments didn't do anything, they kept the borders open. All this sickness, Long COVID, it's being ignored."

Sharon said the media were censoring what leading scientists were advising. The truth about the pandemic is "not getting out there. It's all misinformation, lobbying groups."

The government's murderous policies place the lives of those deemed CV or CEV in heightened danger. The WSWS spoke to Emmy Kelly, founder of twitter advocacy group Fighting 4 Vulnerable Lives.

The group was founded in response to the government's end to shielding and the removal of CEV/CV status when schools reopened in September. Like all parents who kept children at home for fear of them contracting COVID, parents of CV children faced the stark choice of deregistering and losing their school place, or fines and imprisonment.

"We are hearing of more and more families now being threatened or referred to social services, EWO [Educational Welfare Officers], etc., for unauthorised absence due to schools not being given the power to use the code for Exceptional Circumstances [Section 7 of Education Act 1996] for all CEV families," explained Emmy.

"Pre-pandemic, schools were always able to make exceptional teaching arrangements. The Department of Education guidance to schools is breaching the Equality Act, Disability Act and Human Rights of CEV CV."

Her group worked with the Good Law Project, which challenged the legality of this guidance. The outcome was that the government issued new guidance which, according to the Good Law Project, "conceded that schools need to be sensitive to families' needs when considering absence due to Covid. This is a big win for clinically extremely vulnerable families, but it is only the first step. Our work will now turn to making sure that schools approve reasonable requests for leave and provide full remote education for children who cannot go to school."

The new government guidance does not apply to CV/CEV educators. "Teachers can't work from home, no one can work from home because furlough's ended," said Emmy. "It's an absolute nightmare."

Leaving individual parents to negotiate access to Section 7 with school also "puts parents into a new battle they didn't know existed," explained Emmy. "It erodes relations between home and school. One family we are supporting said school is trying to help and asked for a GP's (general practitioner) letter. When the doctor checked with Public Health England, however, he was told, 'GPs can't write letters [on behalf of CEV/CV children]. The child's

education is more important than health.'

"We've got parents, families in suicide crisis because they have been referred to social services, having a safeguarding referral made on them [for keeping a child off school or even trying to deregister]. There is the stigma, people think there's no smoke without fire, they think child abuse. Once in that area, everything is going on behind closed doors. The parents have to [forgo a legal challenge and] do everything to build a working relationship with the authorities," for fear their children are put into care.

Without a strategy to eradicate the virus, those who are CEV/CV remain in grave danger, as do all children, from Long COVID or even MIS-C/PIMS (Paediatric Inflammatory Multisystem Syndrome).

For their part, the education unions refuse to mobilise their hundreds of thousands of members to demand remote education, knowing they and their pupils to be in danger. The unions maintain the fiction that schools can be made safe with a few mitigation measures, so parents can work to churn out profits.

In a press release, joint National Education Union general secretary Mary Bousted said Tuesday, "We welcome the [government] announcement that vaccination centres will open for 12-15-year-olds over half term... more needs to be done on ventilation in schools and other mitigation measures to stop the virus spreading and putting staff and pupils at further risk as we head into winter."

UK parents organised two school strikes, opposed by the education unions, against the government's prioritisation of profits over lives, with a third taking place today. To join the fight, register today for Sunday's online meeting with scientists and epidemiologists hosted by the WSWS and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact